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ABSTRACT

Changes in the preschool education system are provided for by a new federal law in Portugal, Law 5/97, Law for Preschool Education. This law calls for a new role for the State that involves fewer direct services, less bureaucracy, more efficient supervision, and a greater regulating and compensating role. The law requires parents to participate in preschool education, including participating in running the kindergartens, building a cooperative relationship with teachers and staff; and bringing input to the development of the educational process. In addition, the law considers the role of preschool education as contributing to the whole development of the child and as a support for families. The aims of preschool education and the development of curriculum guidelines are carried out through a participatory process. The development of curriculum guidelines is meant to be a "true mobilizing contract" involving hundreds of professionals. (JPB)

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Preschool Education in Portugal: Development, Innovation and Changes
- A True Mobilising Contract-

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> Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone after stone.
> - But which is the stone that sustains the bridge? - asks Kublai Kan.
> - The bridge is not sustained by this stone or that stone
> - Marco answers , - but by the line of the arch that they create.
> Kublai Kan is silent, reflecting. Then he says: - So are you telling me about the stones? It is the arch that interests me.
> Polo answers back to him: There is no arch without stones.
>
> Italo Calvino. As Cidades Invisíveis
> (The Invisible cities) (1990) Lisbon: Teorema

1. Introduction

The publication of the Law 5/97 - Law for Preschool Education - represented a landwark for the development of preschool education in Portugal. Expanding and developing preschool education is a very important goal for the socialist government elected on October 6, 1995.

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This law considers that preschool education is the first step of basic education: it is the educational foundation for lifelong learning. The Law says that preschool education has a double function: to be an educational opportunity, especially for the most deprived children, and to become a supporting structure for the working families. The State has to be the promotor of a national network of kindergartens both of public and private initiative. The goal is to cover 90% of the five years olds by 1999, 75% of the four year olds and 60% of the three years olds. Up until now we had 45% of total coverage.

The Plan for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education (1996) sets its sights on:

> "a project that can became a true mobilising contract. Through the harmonisation of initiatives, efforts, a sense of citizenship and social participation, this project is possible. The role of the state is to regulate, to coordinate, and to guarantee the achievement of equitable goals which can correct social inequity. The role of civil society is to initiate, to propose, to innovate and to articulate efforts though creative and participatory dynamics".

This means that public and private entities, local authorities, municipalities, private non profit organisations, etc, will develop joint efforts in this Expansion Plan.

2. A new role for the State

A new role is foreseen for the state: a better state, providing fewer direct services, promoting a less bureaucratic administration, more efficient supervision. A state with a regulating and compensatory role. The **regulating role** means creating legislation, providing technical and pedagogical support, creating a system of inspection. **Better supervision** means making assessment and evaluation work by using a consistent system of inspection. **Coordination of provision** means constant monitoring of the system to render possible the compensatory role of the state and the development of the public network as standard. The **compensatory role** means that the state should give special and more direct attention to isolated and socially deprived areas.

In assuming this variety of roles the state has to mobilise initiatives to guarantee full access to preschool education for all children. It must also to strike a balance between its role as planner and arbitrer which regulates, identifies and corrects internal asymmetries of the system, and its role as the promoter of diversified projects in each region and educational community.

The national network of kindergartens* will be composed of state and municipal institutions as well as private non-profit and private profit institutions. All of these settings are part of the national network of kindergartens. Therefore, the concept of public interest includes both state and private institutions. The Government coordinates funding (both the

* *the Portuguese terminology "jardim de infância" (kindergarten) means an institution that serves children from three to five years old, six being the age for the beginning of elementary school*

Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Solidarity) to benefit institutions that are of public interest. The state also recognizes the need to respond to contextual diversity. Sparsely populated areas may eventually have "itinerant programmes", with a travelling teacher providing home-based programmes that may provide educational activities just a few days a week. Deprived urban areas may create special "children and community activity centres", involving all community services and agencies and using an ecological approach.

3. Family participation

The new law for Preschool education states very clearly a crucial role for parents in preschool education. They are expected to participate in the running of kindergartens either through representatives elected for that purpose or through their associations; to develop a cooperative relationship between teachers and staff; to bring input into the formulation of the educational project of the institution and to cooperate in its development; to express an opinion about the opening hours; to participate in educational activities, on a voluntary basis and under the supervision of the school staff. Parents pay according to their possibilities for the expenses regarding expanded hours and meals (social component). They don't need to pay for the educational component. Specific legislation was published around family financial support for the running of kindergartens.

4. General educational principles

The role of preschool education is seen as contributing to the whole development of the child and as a support for families. Preschool

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education aims to provide the child with opportunities for fulfilling group interaction and intellectually stimulating experiences within a safe, predictable and structured environment. The child will learn the social knowledge skills needed to interact with others, especially those who are "different" or marked by social exclusion. Among other goals, preschool education also strives to develop in the child a positive sense of self with curiosity for the surrounding world. It also strives to promote understanding of different lifestyles and cultures, creating a sense that school is a place for multiple learning opportunities. It aims to develop critical thinking and active learning by proactive problem solving and bringing the child to cultural and aesthetic appreciation. Preschool education aims to provide children with motivation to use multiple languages which include reading and writing. It is also geared toward health and environmental education and will provide the child with first-hand experiences of the physical world. It aims to educate children for citizenship and democratic participation according to their age level. The law recognises the possibility of different types of preschool provision in order to respond to contextual diversity.

According to the law, the aims of preschool education are as follows:

a) "To promote the child's personal and social development based on experiences of democratic life within a perspective of education for citizenship;

b) To foster the child's integration in different social groups, teaching respect for different cultures and encouraging growing awareness of his/her role as a member of society;

c) To contribute to equality of opportunity in access to education and for successful learning;

d) To stimulate each child's overall development, with respect for his/her individual characteristics, inculcating patterns of behaviour favourable to significant and diversified learning;

e) To develop expression and communication through different forms as a means of relating, informing, raising aesthetic awareness and understanding of the world;

f) To arouse curiosity and critical thought;

g) To ensure each child's welfare and safety, especially in terms of individual and collective health;

h) To evaluate precocious, deficient or socially unacceptable behaviour, promoting the best guidance for the child;

i) To encourage family participation in the educational process and establish real co-operation with the community".

In order to pursue these goals, special legislation was published around physical conditions and installation of kindergartens; minimum criteria for sellecting educational materials; and criteria for quality evaluation. The publication of curriculum guidelines for all national (public and private) network of kindergartens was an affirmation of the pedagogical and technical role of the state. Minimum requirements for professional staff and pedagogical coordinators were also defined by law.

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5. Curriculum Guidelines as a participatory process

Legislation creating curriculum guidelines was published in July 1997 and a longer and more complete publication was sent to all kindergartens in September 1997. For the 1997-98 school year, they will be considered as recommendations, but they will became binding from the 1998-99 school year onwards. They are expected to be revised in the 2001-20 school year. The approval of curriculum guidelines for preschool education is a decisive step towards ensuring the quality of the national network of kindergartens, involving the definition of common reference points to guide the work undertaken by preschool teachers in the schools making up the network, regardless they belong to the public or private sector.

As the ruling says "Curriculum guidelines are a set of general educational and organisational principles to help preschool teachers make decisions concerning day-to-day practice, i.e., how to conduct the educational process to be undertaken with the children".

I will be describing the process of creating the Curriculum Guidelines as a wide participatory process:

- A well known specialist in early childhood was invited by our Department to act as a consultant and cooperating author of the document. She first consulted with other well-known researchers in what those guidelines should be. She also received input from practitioners.
- A first version of the document was produced (June 1996) in cooperation with the team of early childhood specialists who work for this Department. This first version of the document was sent to

all partners: regional educational authorities, universities and schools for teacher training; teacher associations and unions; private non-profit associations and foundations. Then a wide series of meetings (12 meetings) were conducted throughout the country around this first version of the document, receiving the input of those consulted.

- On the basis of this first consulting process, a second version of the document was prepared (December, 1996). Again, throughout the country, a modality of credited in-service training called "circles of study" was developed involving more than six hundred preschool teachers in 32 circles. The facilitators of these "circles" were teacher educators who were trained in special sessions lead by us. These credited "circles of study" involved 48-50 hours of training, individual study and group presentations. The methodologies involved personal reflection and self-formation. Final seminars were conducted throughout the country. In these seminars the participants in the "circle of study" presented their work to educators and educational authorities in the area and the author of the final document reflected upon their presentations in connection with the curriculum guidelines project.
- The final version of the Curriculum Guidelines was published and was sent out to every kindergarten in September 1997.

This publication presents the general principles and pedagogical aims listed in the Preschool Law; establishes the grounds and organisation of curriculum guidelines; defines the overall guidelines for the preschool

teacher - observing, planning, acting, assessing, communicating and articulating -.It is based on the richness of portuguese cultural and pedagogical tradition, in its value of play and expressivity and in its value of language and aesthetics. They are viewed as a scaffold, a support for the work of the practitioners. As I explained, the document was co-created and co-constructed at different levels, involving researchers, practitioners and teacher trainers in a participatory process. Therefore the document has been very well accepted. The curriculum guidelines are taken in the acception described by Margaret Donaldson; as "the kinds of help that are likely to be of value:

> "The essence of a teacher's art lies in deciding what help is needed in ány given instance and how this help may best be offered, and it is clear that for this there can be no general formula.
>
> Yet perhaps it is possible to say something about the kinds of help that are likely to be of value"
>
> (Donaldson, 1979, pg. 104)

Suggestions are given around the organisation of the educational environment - as a support for the curriculum - including the organisation of the group, classroom space and time, organisation of the educational setting, relations with parents and other partners in the educational process.

Several content areas were defined. By content areas it is understood the general references to consider in planning and assessing learning situations and opportunities. Three content areas were defined: **Personal and Social; Expression and Communication; Knowledge of the World**. The content area of Expression Communication covers three domains:

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a) mastering different forms of expression: dramatic, plastic, body and music expression;

b) mastering language and an initial approach to reading and writing;

c) mastering mathematics.

Early childhood professionals were inquired about the value of the participatory process of creating curriculum guidelines. One says: "it is important to highlight the value of public debate and of pratical work by professionals before defining the final form of the document" (Silva, 1997 pg. 45). Another insists: "it seems correct the fact that Curriculum Guidelines are the product of a reflection about european educational models, but they should consider the specificity of portuguese reality as well as its progressive experimentation which should be participated by early childhood teachers"(ibid).

Professionals consider that Curriculum Guidelines are important because "they render visible the role of preschool education" they "dignify the early childhood profession". "Those guidelines may be taken as a basis to recuperate the classic values of the profession, integrating them in a perspective of researching one's own practice and supporting individual and team reflection, opening the way for innovation in the early childhood field". (ibid pg. 46). Having the opportunity to discuss this document "breaks the isolation of many educators, creating networks of communication with colleagues, primary school teachers, parents, local authorities" (ibid).

6. A true mobilising contract ...

The new legislation and the vaste work of negotiation work with all partners in the Expansion Plan prepared the way for the ennactement of the Government goals.

The participatory process of creating Curriculum Guidelines was and will continue to be a "true mobilising contract" that will envolve hundreds of professionals.

No high quality plan for the expansion of preschool education will be possible without a clear investment in the training of the early childhood professional. She (he) must be, above all dignified in her work.

The early childhood professional has pedagogical autonomy in her/his activity and has the responsibility for the organisation of educational activities. She/he has the right to a career, which means stages, formation, an ethical commitment.

The Government presented to the Parliament a project for revising the Comprehensive Law of the Educational System which was approved in September 1997. All teachers, whether they work in preschools, elementary, intermediate or secondary schools will have four years training. Previously, preschool and primary school teachers had only three years training. This was an important step towards the recognition of the early childhood profession.

There is the need to provide consistent in-service training for all preschool teachers whether they work for public or private entities. We envision in-service training center-based, contextualized, stimulating research and innovation projects.

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Early Childhood Professionals are very important partners for this "mobilising contract". You may ask me why do I insist in the early childhood professional. You are just interested in the preschool expansion plan. And, with Calvino, I will answer back to you:

- "There is no arch without stones".

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